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Abstract

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Keywords

empirical bioethics, qualitative research, interviewing, reflexivity, masculinity, feminism, social egg freezing

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There is a growing body of bioethics research that addresses the importance of adapting empirical, predominantly qualitative, methods to generate debate on ethical arguments. However, there is an absence of illustrative work examining how this could be realised from a feminist perspective. This article, seeking to address the research gap, examines interview methods through a reflexive lens. Drawing on the doctoral research I conducted through interviews with women who were interested in social egg freezing (i.e., healthy women freezing their eggs in anticipation of future infertility), I describe how I encountered a dilemma because of my gendered positionality and the intended Socratic method I had wanted to use. To handle the dilemma, I employed a combination of techniques for posing interview questions: descriptive questioning, Socratic dialogue, and an elicitation method. Based on my experiences of navigating these different methods through the interview process and discussing their effectiveness, I argue that there is value in overlapping different models of interviewing and thus contributing to greater critical reflexivity, an enhanced quality of data, and egalitarian research interactions. The article concludes with some suggestions for applying this fusion of interviewing approaches in future empirical bioethics research.

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Introduction

The "empirical turn" in bioethics, based on the insight that "top-down" approaches to ethics do not satisfy the requirement of a context-sensitive analysis, started decades ago, and has led to bringing together (predominantly qualitative) empirical methods with normative analysis (Dunn et al., 2012). Some authors in the emerging field of empirical bioethics are concerned with the lack of reflection on the nature of empirical research and related epistemological questions of objectivity and truth (Dunn & Ives, 2009). Most researchers in this field make use of classic social science methods and questioning techniques. These methods, however, mostly bear data about lived experiences and meaning making but fail to give us insight into participants' moral reasoning, perceptions, and values that could inform moral theorising. Importantly, moral theorising must not (merely) focus on the abstract but attend to the realities of moral life as it is practiced and resonate with moral actors in the world (Ives et al., 2017).

There is a need for innovative empirical methods detailing how to encounter this moral type of data. As one of the standards from a consensus finding project on the practice of empirical bioethics indicates: "Empirical bioethics research should, if and where necessary, develop and amend empirical methods to facilitate collection of the data required to meet the aims of the research; but deviation from accepted disciplinary standards and practices ought to

be acknowledged and justified" (Ives et al., 2017, p. 12). This "how" is one of the biggest challenges for those trying to engage in empirical bioethics (Ives, 2008). Moreover, empirical standards of rigor are not always consistent when imported into empirical bioethics because not all researchers in the field have received sufficient empirical training (Frith & Draper, 2018; Hurst, 2010; Wangmo & Provoost, 2017).

One of the specific responses to such inadequacy of methodological sophistication and in-depth reflection on the nature of empirical research highlights the importance of critical reflexivity (Hedgecoe, 2004; Ives & Dunn, 2010; Subramani, 2019). This concept makes the researcher's positionality a point of careful consideration as it may influence knowledge construction.

While in principle there is recognition that reflexivity is important for empirical bioethics, in practice there are few examples of reflexive accounts and concrete ways of being reflexive. These examples propose the reflexive method of autoethnography, particularly of confessional tales (van Maanen, 1988), to reveal potential biases and conflicts of interest within the empirical bioethics research process. Nevertheless, this specific form of reflexivity has been criticised for being a proxy for narcissistic self-serving, self-indulgent research—more akin to therapy— at the expense of a broader investigation of the scientific field (Walford, 2004).

In the social sciences and especially within qualitative research, another growing body of literature focusses on the theme of methodological innovation, aiming to instigate discussion and reflection throughout the research process and beyond the simple documentation of experiences. For instance, "active" interviewing styles being explored include Socratic dialogue or deliberative interviewing, which asks confrontational questions and assumes an evaluative attitude. The Socratic approach was coined in the 1980s (Bellah et al., 1985). However, around the turn of the millennium a new wave of qualitative approaches emerged to claim a similar shift in focus, departing from imaginaries of collecting personal information in a one-way neutral encounter, moving towards engagement in dialogue and introspection (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020; Brinkmann, 2007). The new scholars wanted to make interviews more suitable for discussions and clarifications of everyday judgements and abstract concepts. In their view, the interview encounter was an opportunity to construct knowledge through logical reasoning, and it had an epistemic dimension beyond merely collecting experiences and opinions anchored in the doxastic field.[1] However, it is unclear whether active interviewing is compatible with insights for feminist research entailing attentiveness to social power relationships (of race, gender, class, and other social markers), friendship-like rapport, and a strong engagement with participants' emotions (Reinharz, 1992). Several authors have argued that active interviewing would benefit by incorporating such insights from feminist approaches instead of marking rigid distinctions around them (Curato, 2012; Petintseva, 2019).

Elicitation techniques form another example of innovative interview methods recently introduced in the literature. They focus on the use of extra stimuli including photos, vignettes, cards, or drawings, to initiate discussion on difficult and sensitive topics (Barton, 2015; Stalpers, 2007). These techniques have been used to discuss abstract moral dilemmas with groups including children or people from less privileged backgrounds. Such techniques can, by encouraging shared reflection and advocating a multiplicity of voices, mitigate representational problems in qualitative research (Galman, 2009). A recent example of bioethics research that applied such techniques can be found in the work of Cowley (2016) who investigated how genetic testing affected family relations by using family photographs, a social map diagram and the genetic family tree. Similarly, Van Parys et al. (2017) mapped the views of children with the help of a family tree elicitation technique.

1 The adjective *doxastic* comes from the Greek term *doxa*, which refers to opinion or judgement. Doxa is contrasted with *episteme*—that is, with truth and scientific knowledge (Peters, 1967).

The literature on innovative interviewing methods, which includes active interviews, is highly fragmented and devotes little or no space to explaining the relationships among them. This article seeks to address, through a reflexive lens on interview methods, the research gaps in empirical bioethics. It draws on my doctoral research, which employed an interrogative mode of interviewing combined with a feminist research perspective to investigate women's decision-making about social egg freezing (SEF)[2], a process whereby healthy women freeze their eggs as a preventive action against age-related fertility loss (De Proost et al., 2021, 2022). I begin by introducing the research on which the article is based. I then describe how I was confronted with a dilemma because of my gendered positionality and the intended method I had planned to use. I reflect on how I constructed my own fusion of methods as I followed through in the interviews. Finally, I discuss how effective my approach was, concluding with some suggestions for applying this approach in future research.

Study Background

My Ph.D. research explored the sensitive topic of women's interest in SEF, a topic that is deeply personal, private and possibly confronting to discuss. My research aimed to better contextualise existing arguments in the bioethics debate regarding women's reproductive autonomy. By examining their moral reasoning, the study would not rely only on intuition and the conceptual apparatus of moral principles that was available in the bioethics literature. Instead, I selected the qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews for collecting and understanding women's moral experiences. This was in line with a strong feminist tradition that draws on phenomenological or narrative accounts to better ground critical theory in lived experiences (Reinharz, 1992) and to get a "systematic view from below" (Mies, 1993, p. 69). Standpoint epistemology argues that oppressed groups have a privileged insight into what is really going on in the world (Harding, 1995).

My sample consisted of 21 women (see Table 1 for the sample characteristics). I conducted 27 in-depth interviews during the period of February 2019 to February 2021. The interviews were carried out face to face with 11 participants, and through video-enabled connections with the other 10, as determined by our respective locations and/or each participant's preference. The study was conducted after obtaining approval from the ethics committee of both hospitals where I recruited participants (in Brussels and Ghent, Belgium). Pseudonyms were generated and used throughout the work.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics (N = 21)

Age range (years)	29–41
Mean age	35
Relationship status	
Single	14
New relationship (not older than six months)	5
Longer relationship	2
Educational attainment	
Bachelor's	1
Master's	18
Ph.D.	2

2 Although critical objections exist against this conceptualisation, I follow Baldwin (2019) that this is the most common signifier of the practice in question and keep using this wording because I am specifically interested in the social conditions of this practice.

Nationality (citizenship)	
Belgium	15
Brazil	1
Egyptian	1
France	1
Netherlands	1
New Zealand	1
Uganda	1
Ethnicity (self-identified)	
Black African	1
Chinese	2
Congolese	1
Egyptian	1
White	16
Sexual orientation	
Bisexual	1
Hetero	19
Lesbian	1
Religion	
Catholic	2
Christian	5
Muslim	1
Non-religious	13
Net income/month (euros)	
750–1500	1
1500–2000	3
2000–3000	12
> 3000	5

I had drawn on feminist empirical bioethics for a range of reasons. First, while there is considerable interest in bioethics around SEF as a touchy subject, there is also an absence of attention for women's lived experiences in the context of SEF. This situation reflects broader trends and habits in philosophical ethics, such as the drive for abstraction and decontextualisation (Scully, 2018). Second, men are absent from relevant social-scientific groups and institutions that work on this topic (Hadley, 2020). This could be related to a "widely held but largely untested assumption" (Inhorn, 2012, p. 6), held in the social sciences, that men are not interested in reproductive matters. Few qualitative studies have men as authors or co-authors. By contrast, men publishing on the topic of SEF are often clinicians or bioethicists who do not consider feminist perspectives on reproduction and knowledge construction. As a pro-feminist researcher who recognises the complexity of privileges and oppressions, I could not identify with those authors or accept their claims.

Conscious of not quite fitting in with existing scholarship on SEF, I was aware of being a double outsider. I was a researcher in moral philosophy working with empirical social science methods, and I was a man using these methods to study a topic which has mainly been seen as a women's issue. It was therefore essential that I employ a reflexive approach and be transparent about the overall research process. In what follows, I will use examples from my research diary and transcribed interviews to highlight a few dilemmas I encountered in setting up and conducting the interviews.

Designing the Interview Guide

I began my doctoral research by reflecting on the question of how I could collect data on a topic, at once sensitive and controversial, related to abstract concepts of autonomy and justice. Quite early, during my desk research, I came across active interviewing styles. My background in philosophy made me intuitively enthusiastic about Socratic dialogue and epistemic interviewing. As I aimed to debate moral and ethical dilemmas on the ground, these techniques were especially suitable.

However, several issues arose with the idea of using Socratic interviews. Based on my affinity with gender and diversity studies, I knew this active mode of interviewing could be associated with "masculine" faults and reinforces hierarchical and privileged relationships. Aggressive questioning, leading questions, putting participants between a rock and a hard place, and imposing my views as an interviewer seemed to conflict with feminist perspectives (Petintseva, 2019). Feminist qualitative research called for highlighting the role of showing care as I spoke to participants; it also called on me to negotiate the complexities inherent in attempts to represent participants' voices (Boonzaier, 2014; Broom et al., 2009; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Oakley, 2016).

In this regard, the question of gender incongruence lingered in my mind during the early stages of the project. For instance, when I presented my research proposal to peers at feminist seminars, I often got the following questions: Would participants not be reluctant to share their stories about SEF, covering personal and private topics such as motherhood, anticipated infertility, and reproductive health—with a male interviewer? Was it recommendable to stage a Socratic dialogue that might exaggerate my masculinity through body language and conversation? I was groping in the dark because there were only a few studies that explicitly reported on the gender dynamics of male researchers interviewing women (Ortiz, 2005). Furthermore, no papers existed that used Socratic dialogue to study ethical issues in reproduction. Driven by a disposition to pursue truth, I was eager to explore this gap in the literature and to better understand this critique.

Through further reading on this issue, I encountered a specific dilemma that I would like to call the dilemma of Socrates' position. In the literature on active and epistemic interviewing, rapport and awareness of positionality seemed to be secondary. For a good dialogue, it seemed not to matter what markers of gender or other identities were in play: the topics or concepts under discussion would be central. However, feminist literature revealed detailed discussions of the insider/outsider concept, of giving voice to participants, and of the researcher's role in epistemic privilege; little of this literature showed much attention for interviews investigating moral reasonings. Each research tradition left me with a distorted caricature of the interviewer's position. The challenging investigator and the caring conversationalist each glossed over important specificities of what I wanted to integrate.

To balance this dilemma, I decided to follow a twofold structure in my interviews (see interview guide in Supplementary File 1). After informing each participant of my method, I would start with descriptive, grand-tour questions that would allow me to build rapport and openness. This sensitivity seemed necessary before exploring an interviewee's viewpoints. In the second part, I would use Socratic dialogue combined with an elicitation technique. The latter technique would be especially useful to reduce power inequities and encourage participants to share their ideas. Instead of relying only on verbal questioning, I created a projective device of plastic statement cards where participants could respond to (see Table 2). The cards, based on arguments found in the bioethics literature, were chosen as a way of focusing on participants' thinking aloud. I would invite them to say everything that came to mind while looking at the statement each card presented. On this plan, the cards would allow participants to exert more agency. Balancing Brinkmann's (2007) epistemic interviews, the

elicitation cards would not press respondents to provide justifications but rather treat participants as co-inquirers in a joint process of critically testing and revising the views formulated on the cards. This approach would allow for some of the positive values of feminist research perspectives, such as giving voice to participants in a supportive and cooperative context.

Table 2
Statement Cards Used for the Interviews

Statement	**Description of moral issue in the SEF debate**
Every woman should have access to this technology.	*Access* statement probing who should have access and whether this is the current reality
Egg freezing is an individual and technological solution to a social problem.	*Individualisation* statement probing whether it is morally problematic for individuals to use technology to handle a problem that is social in nature
Egg freezing leads to the further oppression of disadvantaged groups in society.	*Furthering oppression* statement probing whether this technology worsens the oppression of disadvantaged groups (women, people of colour, sexual minorities)
Egg freezing gives women more freedom.	*Freedom* statement probing the technology's emancipatory potential

This twofold structure and elicitation technique seemed crucial for me as I aimed to create a flow between emphatic listening and active questioning as the participants told their stories. However, after completing a few pilot interviews with colleagues, I was still in quandary whether this was the right way to go. I revealed this in my reflexive diary:

> I adapted some statements after my interview with [colleague] in political science. The wording was too difficult and abstract. I am not sure that the two parts can be completely separated because when I work with the statements [colleague] still mentions her personal experiences to back up her opinion. Is egg freezing first and foremost a personal sensitive story which is not easily theorised? Why do I need those statements cards?

Engaging in Interviews

Blurry and Porous Distinctions of Being a Researcher and Pro-Feminist Man

Following my interviews, I observed that participants did not seem to find it difficult to broach sensitive questions while speaking to me as a male interviewer. Nor had it been hard for them to give me a glimpse into their private lives. For instance, my first impression of Erika illustrates this, as I noted in my diary:

> After I entered her living room, she said immediately, before I had even properly introduced myself: "I received very good news this morning. The clinic called and said that I still have eggs of good quality for my age, one pick-up would probably be enough for me." A positive tone was set, and she was immediately voluble. We started the interview in a relaxed and free-wheeling atmosphere.

The women in my study were not protective or reluctant to let me enter their private life worlds; they rather appreciated that I was interested in their situation, so often characterised by senses of loneliness and social isolation (De Proost et al., 2022). Some excerpts in my research diary acknowledge the vulnerability of women who proved likely to welcome the presence of a friendly and knowledgeable listener. For example:

> What sticks in my memory after the interview with Nina is her loneliness and how she described coming home after work to "an empty flat," how she thought about filling the family gap by taking on a puppy, how she felt like a failure because she was not where she wanted to be in life—"married and having children." She also proposed, herself, to do a follow-up interview. Is she seeking someone to connect with?

Sometimes I acquired more information than I expected or was comfortable with, for instance on their current dating adventures. I discovered that this sharing of information was necessary for a trustful rapport with the interviewee.

Nevertheless, I met with a range of reactions during the interviews, reactions that made me aware of negotiating my masculine identity. For instance:

> Julie: Can I ask you question?
>
> Me: Yes, of course.
>
> Julie: As a man, what is it like to interview a lot of women about this? Do you approach this very scientifically?
>
> Me: I am not a woman, but I try to empathise with your situation as best I can.
>
> Julie: But why did you choose this topic?
>
> Me: By the news that Apple and Facebook would offer egg freezing for female employees and an interest in women's struggles to gain reproductive autonomy. So, I am motivated by feminist ideals of social justice and gender equality.

Similarly, Lotte asked, "Can you understand the decision of women to do egg freezing?" Other participants spontaneously highlighted the advantage of being a man. When it comes to freezing reproductive material, I was told: "be happy that you are a man and not a woman and don't have the feeling of a biological clock" (Julia). Or similarly:

> I just want to emphasise that women have to go through a lot of things that men never go through. [. . .] Men just go to a place, look at a magazine, and they can freeze their sperm; it is so easy, and we must do all those strange and crazy things. (Lan)

Another deliberative moment was my first encounter with Lotte, an incident that put my masculinity up front. As I noted in my diary:

> When I arrived at her flat, there was a man present. I immediately thought it was her current partner and that he would stay for the interview (this could create an interesting opportunity because I had never done a couple interview, nor had I expected this situation with women interested in SEF). The man started talking about an alarm that he'd installed for Lotte and that I was not to try anything. Was my presence a threat for him? Lotte said "don't worry" to him and that he could go now. A few seconds later she asks me if I want a cup of tea and tells me he is just a friend that is a bit overprotective.

This incident seems to indicate that my interest in researching SEF was viewed with suspicion by this man in terms of my sexual intentions. Although I never intended to sexualise or even chat up my participants, my presence was enough to compel him to make a statement about his manhood. Comparing this situation with some participants' complaints, that some men were afraid of higher-educated women and not comfortable enough to handle women's growing independence, was intriguing for me.

For some women, my gender identity seemed less important than my professional background as a researcher in bioethics, distinct from the clinical staff they were frequently encountering in the process of egg freezing. My positionality was an advantage for them to complain about men's inappropriate behaviour in the occupational world of assisted reproductive technology.

In one example, "men are often the doctors, and for them it remains something very scientific, and you actually know that there is a lot unknown, but the way they are speaking seems like the view of an absolute authority" (Julie). In another example, "I noticed that a male gynaecologist showed a lack of understanding for my situation [. . .] he said, 'you are young and still can get pregnant the natural way'" (Laura). In a similar vein: "Look, that was a male doctor who, in my experience, I was really screaming in pain, and he did not take that into account" (Melissa). These reactions were the results of openly discussing the significance and dynamics of gender roles in researching SEF.

Moreover, I was puzzled by the critical opinions of some participants on the language of the feminism movement and how they did not recognize the role of this movement in the struggle for reproductive rights and women's liberation. One said, "I am not a feminist [. . .] it is just a tag for people going to a mob that won't change anything" (Jie). Another said, "all they [feminists] talk about is strong independent women—I don't need a man. Sorry, excuse my language, but this is bullshit. Every woman needs a man, and every man needs a woman, that's nature" (Elmira).

The tension between defending my social ideals and being reflexive on power relations, I would argue, represented a bigger dilemma than gender incongruence in these interview contexts. I did not want to criticise such words from women using some sort of moralising rhetoric (saying, "you're wrong") because this would drive them into defensive modes instead of encouraging them to take part in open dialogue with me and would also pull me far afield of my research objective. On the other hand, I wanted to engage in a research praxis that would be critical, consciousness-raising; I did not want to just reinforce these women's views. In the end, showing mutual respect and accepting pluralism was of greater importance to me than reaching consensus on this topic where full agreement can never be achieved.

"I am Going to Cry Today": Negotiating Emotions

During the interviews, another tension emerged for me: how to handle emotions in combination with the more active interview style that I wanted to apply. As the first part of the interview progressed, each participant might reveal emotionally sensitive talk. "Now I'm

starting to cry," said Emma; "I blame it on the hormones and the fact that this decision triggered something emotional in me." Julia said, "I think I am going to cry today" and, after a moment's silence, she started crying. I was prepared for these confrontations but, as my diary reveals, I often reflected on the impact of emotion in words like the following:

> I feel emotionally exhausted after hearing what happened to Julia. Her boyfriend just broke up with her before she had to do the egg retrieval. What a painful revelation. Could he not choose a better timing? It is not the first time I've encountered strong emotions related to egg freezing decisions, but it makes me question the role of emotions in the interview process.

The participants' emotional needs made me insecure surrounding my methodological and epistemological choices. In the literature on Socratic dialogue and epistemic interviewing (Brinkmann, 2007), emotions have traditionally been kept at bay because they occupy a lesser standing while reasoning. Emotions are perceived as barriers, obstacles, or impediments to the production of rational knowledge. However, such a tendency seems to reinforce the Cartesian mind-body split and related gender dichotomies in qualitative interviews, one that aligns rational endeavour with masculinity. In contrast, feminist scholarship in epistemology has illuminated that emotions are a "necessary feature of all knowledge and conceptions of knowledge" (Jaggar, 1997, p. 190).

As the dialogue flowed, participants' emotions were important cues for me to constantly evaluate, asking myself in each case whether the emotion caused further distraction or whether it was relevant to continue the interview. For instance, when one participant talked for fifteen minutes about intimate concerns and tales of failed relationships, associated with raw emotions of grief, it became unthinkable to start with the discussion of the four statements. Because this strategy would ruin the interview, I asked some more nondirective questions. It was a way to respect the interview's cadence and to actively acquiesce to the participant's direction.

Also, in the second part of each interview, emotions were an important source of information. Anger or irritation in reaction to a statement revealed a lot for me. For instance, Melissa's reaction to the second statement is illustrative:

> Me: Do you think it is an individual solution to a societal problem?
>
> Melissa: I have two reservations; there is precisely an implicit value judgement underneath, that it is not necessary to do egg freezing. But if it is an individual solution to a societal problem, so what? That is my first reaction. Second: Jesus, folks, if women, who are otherwise childless, would like a child—if you can help them, please help them. [. . .] There is much more you can look at and work on without necessarily addressing women's fertility, but that does not mean I would not help an individual woman who is deeply grieving because she cannot have a child. (Melissa)

Such a reaction signals that Melissa felt strongly about the ethical issue of providing care to childless women. Analysing these emotional microprocesses in my transcripts gave me a fuller understanding of the emotional roots of the participants' reasoning around SEF. It also revealed how the participants tried to cope with feelings of anxiety and evaluate their own life circumstances.

The opacity of the individualisation statement

In several interviews, participants would show resistance when I read the above-mentioned statement out loud. Consider this example from an interview with Emma, where she tries to shut down the conversation:

> Me: Statement two. "Egg freezing is an individual and technological solution to a social problem." What do you think?
>
> Emma: It is an individual problem; difficult question! I think it is an individual problem but not a social one [. . .]
>
> Me: Which social problem would you associate with the idea of egg freezing?
>
> Emma: I think it is a difficult question to answer; in a way it is a social problem. I think it is a difficult question [. . .]
>
> Me: Do you perceive relationship formation as a social problem?
>
> Emma: Is relationship formation a social problem? There is a problem with forming relationships, of course, but is that a social problem? I don't really know. It remains a difficult question. I also have a bit of a headache.

In this extract I noticed how the rather abstract statement, referring to the aspect of individualisation which is central in the bioethics literature on SEF (Petersen, 2021), resulted in short and evasive answers, giving little in-depth information at first sight. Other participants had similar difficulties and did not understand what this statement was hinting at.

Reflecting subsequently on the interviews, and discussing my transcripts with experienced colleagues, made it clear that this statement had been insufficiently developed. As a result, I was sometimes too suggestive in my prompts, leaving inadequate space for participants to formulate their thoughts in their own words. Unconsciously, I introduced an intellectualist bias by calling for a scholastic attitude, foisting abstract statements onto the practice of women's lay normativity (Bourdieu, 2000), in danger of instrumentalising and manipulating participants. Put bluntly, people who have never been asked to think openly and in-depth about structural mechanisms of individualisation may hesitate or fail to reply to questions inviting such a narrative. As a naïve beginner in Ph.D. research, I had pictured the interviewees in the image of bioethicists capable of reasoning in quite abstract manner on their everyday decision-making and struggles. Looking back, some participants' evasive responses to this statement supplied valuable empirical material regarding the discord between, on the one hand, the intuitive thoughts of actual women and, on the other, the theoretical arguments made in bioethics literature. It helped me to expose the institutional, social, and cultural forces that had left gaps between theory and practice. It also pointed out directions for further studies in SEF, such as the importance Annemie had referred to, of forming relationships—a fact often neglected in the premises of arguments that bioethicists make.

The women in my study did not seem to be easily intimidated by the cards' other statements. These conversations exhibited key characteristics of epistemic interviewing:

Me: Does egg freezing give women more freedom?

Lotte: Freedom and time, in fact.

Me: Are these the same thing?

Lotte: No, they are not the same thing. Freedom: freedom in the sense that you have the choice to do this, that's a certain freedom you have.

Me: More choice always means more freedom?

Lotte: Yes—how should I put it—every woman has the freedom to do this or not, if they can afford it. I see this as more freedom for the future. More time, but this kind of insurance, is it freedom? It gives me time, but does it give me freedom? No; actually, not—because I am limiting myself in part, because I need it. I am completely dependent on the technique, and on the doctors. It gives me options and it gives me time. It maybe gives me a certain sense of freedom.

Me: But not the desired sense of freedom?

Lotte: No, no; on the contrary, I think.

Me: You would in fact prefer another way?

Lotte: I think most women are not doing egg freezing for fun. It is in fact a well-considered personal choice, perhaps because of a medical necessity or because of a social problem. I don't think there are women who do this just for fun, but having the freedom to do it is a good thing.

I asked brief critical questions to investigate Lotte's view and gave her the space to provide explanations for her thoughts. This conversation focused not only on self-centred narratives but discussed her rationale for SEF, using a certain moral vocabulary. This process of questioning provided insights that did not emerge during the first part of the interview. Lotte suggested an alternative approach where SEF has been portrayed as a freedom-enhancing, empowering, and positive thing to do.

Other participants indicated that the discussions we had were thought-provoking and had supplied an intellectual benefit for them. "I'm glad we're having this interview because now things are coming back," said Melissa. Nina put it this way: "It is actually interesting for me this conversation, very enlightening." "I also found it interesting," said Erika, "to see what is going on in society, a number of interesting things that I am going to think about again." These reactions seemed to indicate that the interviews, at their best, played a kind of cathartic role as women better understood their moral reasoning. If not, all interviews brought catharsis, at least they ended with the pause for thought of an aporia, a state of perplexity or difficulty.

Discussion

The interview material presented in this article reveals quite vividly the complexities of social power relations and emotions in a context of cross-gender interviewing. These challenges, though secondary in the framework of Socratic dialogue or epistemic interviewing (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020), are important to feminist researchers (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008), especially considering how membership in dominant groups impedes or assists dialogue.

This dissensus in the literature on interview techniques shows the dilemma of Socrates' position. While one research tradition seems to neglect methodological sensitivity about the interviewer's social stature, the other seems to overemphasise the importance of gender roles and other power relations. This dilemma calls for reflection and discussion rather than simplistic solutions.

The findings mentioned above have provided valuable insight on the issue. In my experience, man-to-woman interviewing should be viewed as neither inherently problematic nor simply beneficial. Other social factors, including my professional status, shaped interpersonal dynamics and data production and indicated how power is fluid, contextually bound, and situationally variable. Disentangling the relative influence of power variables is far from straightforward, but we should at least acknowledge their potential role in the production of empirical material that can inform bioethics research. At best, they can be brought to the table as an issue to discuss with participants during the interview. This can make the interview process more transparent and contributes to what is called 'strong objectivity' in feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1995), a research goal that is still neglected in the emerging literature of novel deliberative interview styles (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the differences between interview styles may be useful in the analytical realm but, in concrete interview situations, difficult to maintain and blurry. Interview methods, like positionality, are better conceptualised on a continuum that reveals how different interview styles interact. The plot and roles available in interviews cannot be entirely anticipated in advance. There is no *via regia*. In practice, different types of interviewing tend to amalgamate, constantly navigated with a lot of on-the-spot adaptations and improvisations. As bioethics scholars have highlighted, it seems necessary to oscillate between the knowledgeability of a priori critique and the position of a naïve "outsider" who is willing to listen and hear participants' stories (Thuesen, 2011; Widdershoven et al., 2009).

Based on my own experiences, I argue that there is value in overlapping different models of interviewing, contributing to more critical reflexivity, an enhanced quality of data, and egalitarian research interactions. This fusion of various interview methods, to both honour research participants' narratives and challenge dominant views, was already presented in the work of Bourdieu, an author often cited as exemplary for deliberative interviews (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). More recently, such fusion has been promoted by other scholars working in sociology (Curato, 2012; Thuesen, 2011), and in fields such as criminology (Petintseva, 2019) and education (Kuhtmann, 2005).

Including an elicitation technique in this study's fusion of methods led to additional opportunities and challenges in reducing power imbalances. One difficulty was the formulation of overly complex statements. This sometimes ended up in a narrow context for discussion, limiting the outcomes of the elicitation. A technique of elicitation is therefore not foolproof; it does not entirely transform or flatten existing power relationships. It is an important corrective to the complex workings of social inequality and power, when developing methods for research, to emphasise and deploy critical awareness of potential biases and prejudices.

Several rounds of discussion and feedback concerning the elicitation technique, with people whose profiles may be like potential participants', can be one way in which future

research could address this issue. In a pilot testing phase, redundant or unclear statements could be rephrased or deleted. Another option is to include more statements, or blank cards, and let participants choose on the spot which they want to discuss further (Saunders, 2021). A variety of other paths, available in the wider literature on elicitation, may provide better results. Examples include sentence completion, arranging items in order, photo-elicitation—and, importantly, a unique mixture of elicitation techniques (Barton, 2015; Cowley, 2016).

In this paper, I have restricted my reflexive contemplations to the interviewing phase of a much broader research process and bioethics methodology. Other phases in this process, such as data analysis, writing up, and more fundamental questions about the co-construction of arguments and normative knowledge, merit a much deeper analysis to further demystify the research process of an empirical bioethics study. These are important issues for future research, and more work clearly needs to be done.

Concluding Considerations

In this article I focused on one aspect of reflexivity in bioethics research, that is, how to develop interrogative or deliberative methods of interviewing to collect data that goes beyond experience and meaning making. I discussed and illustrated the benefits and challenges of merging different interview approaches, such as descriptive questions, Socratic dialogue, and an elicitation method to address the socially and ethically sensitive issue of SEF. Finding a balance between questioning what women said and, meanwhile, showing them a non-oppressive and participatory manner was a constant reflexive concern as I conducted my Ph.D. research, as a male interviewer in feminist empirical bioethics.

The creative use of different interview methods provided innovative, in-depth empirical understanding of women's decision-making and allowed me to have a better understanding of the diffuse and complex power distribution in the research context. Whilst there has been very little analysis of the advancement of fusing different interviews styles, this article calls for more scholars to consider its use. I would argue that the fusion of interview methods should lie at the heart of feminist empirical bioethics as it has the potential to gain a more complete, accurate, and nuanced understanding of power relations and further encourage the ideal of strong objectivity.

Sharing what works in empirical research is of key importance for future research in the field. Candid reflexivity on data collection, and more specifically on interviewing, tends to go unrecognised in most of the published articles of empirical bioethics. Authors all too often present method as a clean clinical process, and this tendency risks reducing qualitative method to a form of proceduralism. By clarifying some of my own issues, I hope to push the conversation on methods for empirical bioethics further: we are only at the beginning of a reflexive turn in this field. This conversation on methods, like the interviews I conducted, is essentially a messy and complex practice instead of a neat and polished dialogue.

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Appendix A

Supplementary File 1. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Part 1: Personal Experience with SEF

1. Motivation, reasons for freezing
    a. When did you began to think about egg freezing and why?
    b. How did you find out the existence of this technology?
    c. What was it about egg freezing which appealed to you? Did you consider any alternatives to egg freezing?
    d. What was it about your situation which made you feel that becoming a mother was not yet something you felt able to pursue?
        i. What does parenthood mean to you? What do you think about single motherhood?
        ii. Which conditions are important to you? Income? Relationship? Stability?
    e. Which factors had an influence on your choice to start with this procedure?
2. Relational aspects
    a. Did you discuss this with anyone?
    b. Have their opinions influenced your decision?
    c. Was there anyone you didn't tell?
    d. Do you know anyone else who has frozen their eggs or may have thought about it?
3. Experience with the clinic and process
    a. How did you choose a clinic?
    b. What was your experience of that clinic like?
    c. What kind of information did the clinic discuss with you before starting the procedure?
        i. Do you find the given information sufficient?
        ii. Have you also looked for information on your own?
        iii. What information would you give to other candidates?
    d. Can you tell me about your experiences with the process at this moment?
        i. What did you find the most difficult and what appears to be better than expected?
        ii. Did you ever consider stopping? What made you continue?
4. Self-perception
    a. Has freezing your eggs made a difference to how you see yourself?
        i. Prompts: If so, how do you see yourself now as different from before you started with egg freezing? How would you say you have changed?
    b. What about the way other people see you?
        i. Prompts: members of your family, friends? Changed?

Appendix B

Part 2: Statement Cards

Statement	Description of moral issue in the SEF debate
Every woman should have access to this technology.	*Access* statement probing who should have access and whether this is the current reality
Egg freezing is an individual and technological solution to a social problem.	*Individualisation* statement probing whether it is morally problematic for individuals to use technology to handle a problem that is social in nature
Egg freezing leads to the further oppression of disadvantaged groups in society.	*Furthering oppression* statement probing whether this technology worsens the oppression of disadvantaged groups (women, people of colour, sexual minorities)
Egg freezing gives women more freedom.	*Freedom* statement probing the technology's emancipatory potential

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